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Devine, P., & Carney, G. M. (2015, Sep). What do children think about old age? ARK.  
<http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/>

### **Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

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## What do children think about old age?

Paula Devine and Gemma M. Carney

### Introduction

While the fact that the world's population is ageing is well recognised, the impact of this change on the lives of children is rarely investigated. All too often, the very old and the very young are relegated to the category of 'bookend' generations. Recently, researchers have become increasingly aware that the most successful ageing societies are those that foster high levels of solidarity between generations (Carney et. al., 2014). In fact, researchers such as Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) argue that age segregation in many societies is 'a root cause of ageism'. Segregating different generations into age-based institutions (such as schools or retirement communities) can lead to both the young and the old being sidelined. Unless we encourage more contact between the generations outside the family context, this situation is unlikely to improve.

One way to move this agenda forward is to establish an evidence base of inter-generational contact, understanding and attitudes. Thus, questions were included in the 2014 *Kids' Life and Times (KLT) Survey*, exploring the opinions of 10 and 11 year olds to ageing and ageism, especially in relation to older people. This research ran parallel to questions on this topic being asked of adults within the 2014 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey.

### Growing older

The 4,757 KLT respondents were asked to write down the good and the bad things about getting old. From a child's

perspective, being older often means that they will escape the shackles of childhood – especially having to go to school – and that is something to be happy about. As the following quotes show, some children thought that the good thing about being old is the ability or freedom to be able to do things that a child cannot:

*Being able to do things you could never have done before.*

*You can relax and think about life. It is also the time you can really be free to live life if you want to.*

*Being able to have children and grandchildren.*

*You would be able to drive and use your own money.*

Other children focused on higher social status and rights, for example:

*Get privileges that children don't get.*

*Being more independent and having more power.*

*Having more rights.*

*Having more responsibility.*

In contrast, many of the suggestions about the negative side of growing older focused on physical aspects. For many children, coming to the end of life, or dying, was emphasised. Linked to this, was a sense of loss, loneliness, or not being able to do the things that you used to do, for example,

*You get diagnosed with things sometimes, like Parkinson's and other things. I know you can get them at any age, but they have a higher risk rate. Plus, you get wrinkles and some people might*

*have fears of dying.*

*Being close to death, people around you dying.*

*Losing the ability of doing what you love.*

Society's treatment of older people was mentioned, both in terms of respect and actions:

*People may be disrespectful to you. Bad gangs might smash in the house at night and get the old person's money. I feel sad about that – I think they should be treated nicely.*

Interestingly, several children highlighted how the bad and good things might counterbalance each other:

*If you're unlucky you can't move or lose memory but actually old is great.*

However, some KLT respondents interpreted growing older differently, and focused on the transition from childhood to adulthood and the need to work:

*You have to get a job you have to pay bills.*

*You have to pay taxes and a mortgage and buy food and have restraint so you don't eat 50 chocolate bars every day.*

It is obvious from these responses that children are thinking about different time frames. For some, they are thinking about many years in the future, and perhaps the end of life, whilst others are thinking about 10 to 15 years in the future. So, to really understand what it means to be old, we first need to work out what chronological age we are talking about.

## When does old age begin?

We asked KLT and NILT respondents at what age do they start to think of someone as an ‘old person’. It seems that the age at which someone is perceived as being ‘older’ is correlated with the age of the observer. Some 10 year olds thought 30 was old, while over one half (52%) of adults taking part in NILT thought being aged 61-70 years made you an ‘older person’. Put another way, the mean age at which KLT respondents (children) thought of someone as being old was 54 years, whilst among NILT respondents (adults), the mean age was 69 years. However, kids tended to be less confident in answering this question, with 31 per cent saying they just don’t know – see Figure 1.

Many of the children taking part in the KLT survey gave precise ages, whilst others rejected the idea that an exact age could be specified:

*60-65 depending on what their abilities and appearance.*

*I don't really like to think of anyone being old. If I had to say I'd probably say when the adult is in his/her 50's/60's.*

Some respondents explained their responses:

*80, because I have a granny who is 80.*

*I think at about 60 years old because you start to get more wrinkly.*

*I think of them as old when they are 48. Sorry to those who are 48!*

*When they hit the age 60 and above u would need to help them out with stuff.*

Other children acknowledged that ‘age is just a number’:

*I always respect all ages.*

*I don't think of them as old people. I just think of them as people they have lasted longer.*

*None. They are never old if they are loved. Love cannot wear off.*

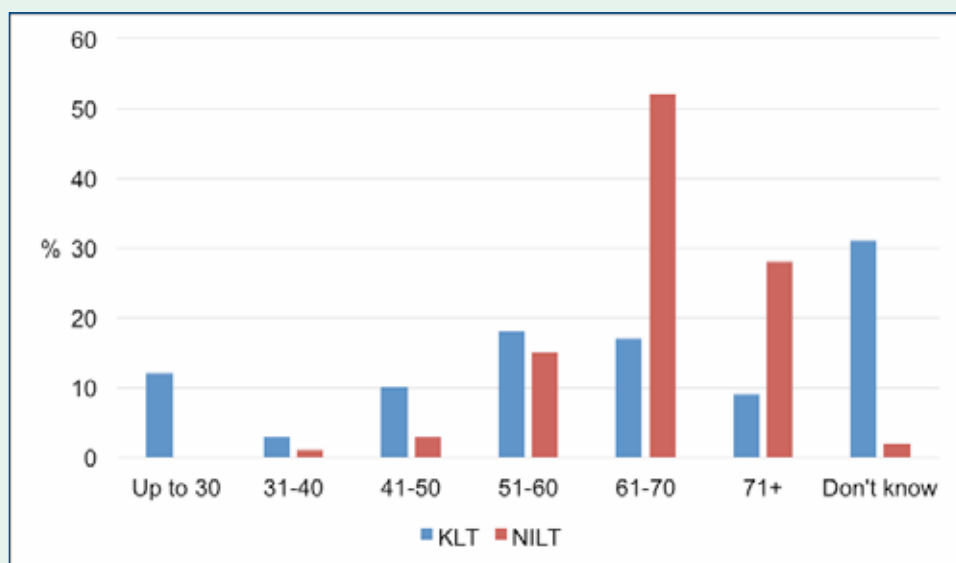


Figure 1: At what age do you start to think of someone as an ‘old person’ (age in years)

*They are not old because they can still be capable at any age.*

*Well, no age as everyone is young for as long as they live.*

## Respect

Earlier in this Update, we referred to inter-generational contact. For this to work, there needs to be mutual respect among all groups, and this was explored within KLT. When asked which group of people is treated with the most respect, four out of ten children identified old people, followed by children (23%) – see Figure 2. The lowest response was in relation to teenagers (2%). However, one in five respondents didn’t know how to answer this question.

When it came to who was treated with the least respect, there was some symmetry in the responses, in that old people were least likely to be identified (8%), and teenagers were the most likely to be identified (30%). Again, a high proportion – over one in three – did not know how to answer the question.

There was a general sense that children think that old people are admired and respected by young people – 77 per cent agreed a lot or a little with this statement. A slightly smaller majority of NILT respondents (54%) also agreed with this statement.

The data suggest that there is a perception that older people are respected in society. But is this respect reciprocal? It seems that it is. Only 16 per cent of children agreed that old people are not willing to listen to young people’s views. Interesting, a higher proportion of adult respondents (42%) thought this.

## Perceptions of capabilities

We wanted to explore children’s perceptions of older people in relation to their behavior and their capabilities. For each of four activities (moving around; being generous; remembering things; and living alone), children were asked to identify which description best fitted the way they think about old people that they see or know.

Half of respondents thought that old people are a bit slow when they move around, although only seven per cent said that they are slow and hold other people up. One in five children couldn’t choose a response to this question. For the other three questions in this section, children were more sure of their views. Old people were seen as generous, with 68 per cent saying ‘really generous’, and 18 per cent saying ‘quite generous’. Opinion was split in relation to memory. One quarter (26%) said that old people remember most things, and a further

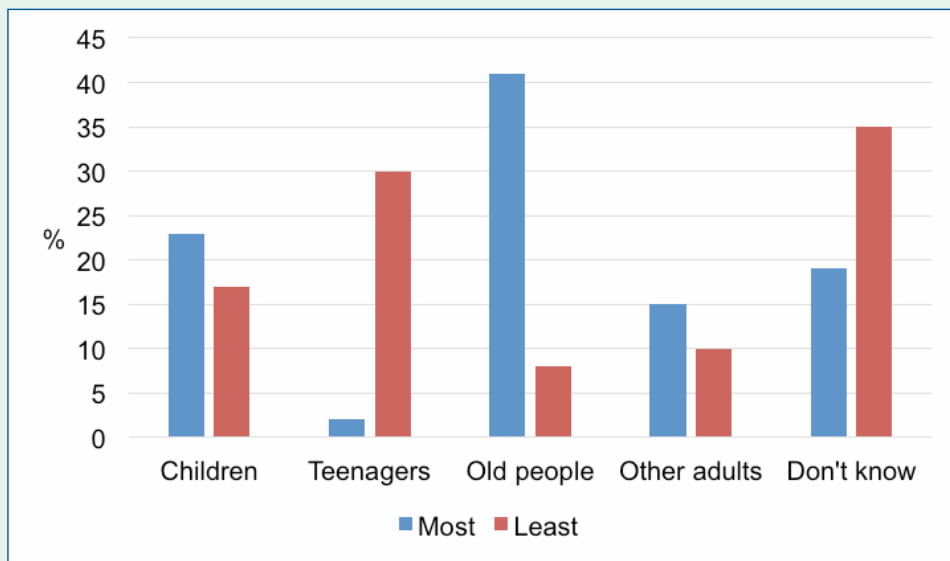


Figure 2: Who gets treated with most or least respect?

17 per cent said that they have a good memory. However, 45 per cent said that old people are a bit or very forgetful. There was a general feeling that old people can live independently (23%) or with a bit of support (48%). Only five per cent of children said that old people cannot live on their own.

These figures suggest that children have a positive view of old people, with few suggesting that old people are problematic. The data also suggest that children do not assume that older people are all the same; on the contrary, children seem to appreciate the diversity of the older population. This is unsurprising, considering that many children view old age as starting at 30 years.

## Life at 40

2,107 children answered the question 'What do you think you will be doing when you are aged 40?', although 224 of these said that they did not know. In general, the responses were positive, and related to having active lives. There was an overwhelming focus on work, family, or both:

*Work, work and more work.*

*Be the dad of two kids.*

*Doing my job if it is either being a mother or my other job.*

Indeed, some children were quite specific about the job that they would be doing, which included being a writer, a teacher, or farming. Others outlined more fantasy lives, such as:

*At NASA training to be an astronaut and going to the moon would be my dream.*

*A football legend.*

*Driving a motorbike at 300mph.*

*Going onto 'I am a Celebrity get me out of here' for the 5th time or travelling around the world.*

However, some children were more modest in their expectations:

*"My dream would be a sports star - but reality a geography teacher.*

## Life at 70

Moving further into the future, 2,609 children answered the question 'What do you think you will be doing when you are aged 70?', and 292 said that they did not know. The comments suggest that whilst the life of a 40 year old was seen in a positive light, being 70 was a mixture of good and bad. Again, there was a strong focus on family:

*Living in a quiet place with my wife still enjoying life.*

*Living with my husband in a nice*

*cosy flat and my children and grandchildren visiting me every weekend.*

Retirement was also a key issue, and many children focused on inactivity:

*I'll be retired and sitting at home reading the newspaper.*

*Nothing.*

*I'd be sleeping a lot.*

Being 70 was seen as a time to receive help, but also to give something back to society:

*Retiring and getting help from my children.*

*Spending money on my grandchildren and helping people in the community (charity working).*

However, one child correctly noted that:

*The law won't let you retire until you are 67 now so by the time I am 67 the number will have increased so probably still working.*

There was also an emphasis on frailty, and many respondents referred to illness, dying or being dead:

*In hospital with a fractured arms and legs.*

*I would be forgetting everything, I would be getting depression.*

*In a hospital bed or lying in a coffin.*

Nevertheless, there were many positive comments:

*Sitting on a green armchair with a waistcoat and black shoes watching the television all fit and well.*

*Smiling at all young people because they're jealous.*

*Still exercising and not letting my age slow me down.*

*Loving life.*

*Probably on the verge of retirement after a well spent life with adventures and accomplishment.*

## Inter-generational contact

Several comments have alluded to spending time with family members and to reciprocal help among generations. When asked whether inter-generational contact is common, the results were mixed: 31 per cent thought that young and old people do not mix together often, whilst 46 per cent thought the opposite. However, nearly one quarter (23%) said that they did not know. Nevertheless, there was strong support for such contact, since 69 per cent of children thought it would be better if old and young people mixed together more often.

## Conclusion

This Research Update explores children's opinions and understanding of what it means to be old. These data suggest that being old, and the age at which people are seen as old, means different things to different people. Looking forward into their future, being 40 was seen as having active lives, and contributing to society, work and family. Older age (that is, over 70) was mostly thought of as a time to relax. However, family was seen as import-

ant, with inter-generational support emphasised.

In general, children have a positive view of old people, with few suggesting that they are problematic. It seems that children appreciate the diversity of the older population. The responses also show us that children live in an age-segregated world and may be restricted by their young age. Nevertheless, there is mutual respect between generations, along with explicit support for more mixing between younger and older people. This bodes well for the development of age-integrated societies, which is a focus of voluntary organisations such as Linking Generations Northern Ireland.

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## Acknowledgments

The KLT questions on ageing were funded by the Improving Children's Lives Initiative within Queen's University Belfast.

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Kids' Life and Times is an annual online survey of P7 children in Northern Ireland carried out in school. In 2014, 4,757 children participated.

The Kids' Life and Times survey is a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and the Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what children think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/klr](http://www.ark.ac.uk/klr)) or call Katrina Lloyd on 028 9097 5962 with any queries.

## Key points

- Children identified work, family and getting more respect as some of the good things about getting old. Some of the bad things about getting old included death, illness and loss.
- The mean age at which someone is perceived as being 'older' was 54 years for KLT respondents, but 69 years among adults taking part in NILT.
- 77% of KLT respondents agreed that old people are admired and respected by young people. 54% of adult respondents to the NILT survey believed this.
- Only 16% of KLT respondents agreed that old people are **not** willing to listen to young people's views, compared to 42% of NILT respondents.
- When asked what they think they will be doing when aged 40, responses focused on work, family or both.
- When asked about life when aged 70, children focused on retirement, inactivity, and illness, as well as giving and getting help from family.
- 69% of KLT respondents would like young and old people to mix more often.

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